



Greater Hartford Legal Aid

To: Appropriations Committee
From: Ramona Mercado-Espinoza, Staff Attorney
Greater Hartford Legal Aid
Date: February 9, 2010
Re: Funding for legal services

Good Evening Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Ramona Mercado-Espinoza. I have been a staff attorney at Greater Hartford Legal Aid since 2006. I represent victims of domestic violence in family law cases. I am testifying in support of funding to legal services.

First and foremost, the staff and clients of GHLA thank you for your funding and support last year. We could not have done our work without your support. We continue to assert and protect our clients' fundamental legal rights and advocate for the basic human needs of those living in poverty. Our mission is to eradicate poverty and protect the vulnerable. Our bar is raised very high and here is why:

I'd like to give you a snapshot of Annie's case. Annie was a vibrant, loving and hard working woman who was raising her twin girls when she remarried. Soon after her marriage Annie's life changed drastically. Within weeks, her husband became jealous, controlling and physically violent. If she was late from work he beat her up because he felt she was out with another man. When Annie went grocery shopping with her daughters, he would question the girls about what Annie did and if she spoke with a man. He beat Annie at his whim and will.

When the twins were in their teens, one of them reported to her teacher that she and her sister were sexually molested by their stepfather--Annie's husband. The teacher reported the matter to Annie and DCF. Annie attempted to terminate her relationship with her husband and demanded he leave the apartment. She informed him she was pressing charges against him for molesting her twins. Annie's husband refused to leave. He went to the master bedroom and took out the machete he kept under his side of the bed. He told Annie he was going to kill the girls and make her watch. Then he was going to kill Annie and himself. As Annie attempted to run for safety he twisted and broke her leg and raped her. He was eventually arrested.

Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc.

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Ramona Mercado-Espinoza

Testimony February 9, 2010

Page Two

We represented Annie in her divorce. We obtained sole custody of her twins, and exclusive use of her Section 8 subsidized apartment. We got her divorced. When her ex-husband's sentencing came up, Annie wanted our help to tell her story to the sentencing judge because she struggled to communicate in English. She wanted us to tell the judge how much she and her daughters had suffered at the hands of an abusive man. Annie was relieved when the judge sentenced him to many years in jail and on probation. Because of our intervention, Annie and her twins now feel safe. She is proud that her twins recently graduated from high school and have plans for college.

The safety and well-being of families like Annie's is why legal services needs your continued support and funding. Only with your financial commitment and experienced legal services lawyers can survivors like Annie stand up to abusive partners and win court orders that protect her and her children. Annie kept her life, her children, her apartment and her job. Together we can protect victims and eradicate poverty in CT. Thank you.